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ABSTRACT

Recently South Dakota initiated a statewide report card system, which publicizes school data such as teacher-student ratios and student scores on the Stanford Achievement Test. A survey of South Dakota superintendents on their opinions about the new system was returned by 178 superintendents (74 percent of total), of whom 57 administered small school districts (under 300 students) and 61 administered medium-sized districts (300-1200 students). Most responses and comments about the reporting system were negative. Over half the superintendents felt that South Dakota should not have a statewide report card system, and 71 percent said that the present system does not address the issues of school credibility and student achievement. Over 60 percent believed that the reporting system would not have positive effects on student achievement over the next 5 years or on parent involvement in the schools. Respondents suggested a wide variety of alternative indicators of school accountability and student achievement, the most frequently mentioned being graduate surveys and follow-up on student success after school. Comments showed strong support for outcome-based education, with outcomes determined locally. However, superintendents felt that the current reporting system was in conflict with outcome-based education, since standardized testing encouraged "teaching to the test." (SV)

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# Opinions of Rural South Dakota State Superintendents Toward A Statewide Report Card System

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## Introduction

Over 250 million standardized tests are administered to students in American schools each year (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1982). Reasons for testing are usually linked to larger issues of assessment. Assessment involves collecting information in order to specify strengths and limitations and to make decisions.

With regard to individuals, students are frequently tested as part of the process of assessment to determine entrance into programs or colleges. Sometimes, students are tested to determine membership into legally defined classes -- like gifted and talented or, perhaps, learning disabled. Tests are also used to compare an individual's standing to a reference population. For example, a student may be at the 78th percentile with regard to second grade reading performance.

In each situation described above, a specific question helped to narrow the scope of testing. Tests specifically designed for use to address each question would have been selected on the basis of how well they addressed the question. Even so, most people involved in the

assessment process would argue that the tests used have identifiable strengths and limitations that have to be considered in the total assessment picture. Issues would likely be raised with regard to how well the tests measure what they are reported to measure and to the stability of the measurements.

Recently, a great deal of public focus has been placed on education. Political forces and "blue ribbon" panels have drawn attention to literacy issues, the changing workforce, and the failure of American schools to adequately address the needs of a 21st century society.

As a result of the political rhetoric and published reports (A Nation At Risk, 1983; America 2000, 1991), calls have gone forth for the establishment of state wide reporting systems. Many state legislatures responded by establishing laws that require schools to assess their performance and report their findings to the public. Local papers have often carried front page headlines like "School scores drop" (Argus Leader, 1992) or "District to respond to scores" (Argus Leader, 1992). The administrators of the districts involved often then described what the scores meant -- the school's classification - gifted or learning disabled; the schools standing - compared to other schools. Also, the

administrators have explained how and why they got to where they did -- what the tests really did/didn't tell. Finally, the administrators have reflected on the changes that will be made and predicted the changes that might occur before the next report card.

This trend to view schools in such a public way led us to design a research study to investigate superintendents' opinions about the newly initiated South Dakota statewide report card system. We believed that those who directly answered to the report card system would provide valuable insight into the need for and effectiveness of the system.

Research Procedures

A postcard questionnaire consisting of six questions and space for personal comments about the South Dakota statewide report card system was constructed by the investigators. It was the purpose of this study to ascertain the opinions of school superintendents toward the newly initiated South Dakota statewide report card system.

The population for the study was the total number of school superintendents in South Dakota public school districts. One hundred seventy eight questionnaires were mailed out in January, 1992. Seventy four percent, or 132 questionnaires were returned for analysis.

The superintendents responded to six basic questions: (1) Do you believe South Dakota should have a report card system?, (2) Does the report card system address the pertinent issues of school accountability and student achievement?, (3) Are the categories reported (student-teacher ratio, Stanford Achievement Test scores, etc.,) valid indicators of student achievement?, (4) Will the report card system have a positive effect on student achievement over the next five years?, and (5) Will the report card system motivate parents to become more involved in the schools? A sixth question asked the superintendents to list two factors they considered better indicators of school accountability and student achievement than those listed on the report card. Room was provided for comments from the superintendents.

Each questionnaire was coded so the investigators could classify it into school district size. Size was determined by enrollment. A small school district (SSD) was identified as having 1 through 299 students in kindergarten through grade twelve; a medium school district (MSD) was identified as having 300 through 1,199 students; and a large school district (LSD), was identified as having 1,200 students or more.

Fourteen questionnaires (70 percent) were returned from large

school districts, 61 (87 percent) from medium school districts, and 57 (65 percent) from small school districts.

Findings

The first survey question asked the superintendents if South Dakota should have a statewide report card system. Fifty eight percent of the total respondents indicated that they did not believe South Dakota should have a statewide report card system while 35 percent thought such a system was needed. Another 7 percent did not respond to the question. Responses from all categories of schools surveyed are shown in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 here

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The second survey question asked if the statewide report card system does address the pertinent issues of school accountability and student achievement. Seventy one percent of the superintendents stated "no" to the question. Twenty one percent stated "yes", with 8 percent not responding. Table 2 reflects responses by school category.

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Insert Table 2 here

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The third survey question asked if student-teacher ratio, Stanford Achievement Test scores, etc., are valid indicators of student achievement was the third question asked of the school superintendents. Sixty one percent believed that the categories were not true indicators of student achievement. Twenty eight percent believed that they were valid indicators. Eleven percent of the superintendents did not respond to the question. Table 3 indicates responses on this question by school category.

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Insert Table 3 here

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The fourth survey question asked if the report card system will have a positive effect on student achievement over the next five years. Sixty six percent of the superintendents stated "no" to the question. Twenty five percent thought it would have a "positive" effect. Nine percent of the superintendents did not respond to the question.

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Insert Table 4 here

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The fifth survey question asked if the superintendents thought the report card system would motivate parents to become more involved in the schools. Sixty two percent "did not believe" the report card would motivate the parents. Thirty percent thought it "would." Eight percent of the superintendents did not respond to the question. Table 5 presents responses on this question per school category.

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Insert Table 5 here

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The sixth survey question asked the superintendents to list two factors that they consider to be better indicators of school accountability and student achievement than those factors identified for the statewide report card system. A wide variety of factors were listed such as graduate surveys and follow up on students, success after school, percentage of students going to post-secondary education, parental involvement in the schools, employment of students, etc. The most

frequently stated indicator dealt with the idea of conducting surveys of graduates and determining their status in society.

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Insert Table 6 here

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Comments By Superintendents

A variety of comments accompanied the survey responses. The following comments reflect many points of view:

1. The big push is for Outcome Based Education (OBE), with outcomes determined locally. The report card compares achievement on outcomes determined nationally by the test makers. It also placed exaggerated importance on other factors that may or may not affect achievement in a particular district.
2. If the Division of Education is interested in Outcome Based Education, the statewide report card system issues are at complete opposite of what Outcome Based Education is trying to do. There is too much emphasis on scores, not what a student knows or should know. Test scores and curriculum do

not correlate.

3. Curricula need to be revised. Schools will teach to the tests. How does this fit with Outcome Based Education?
4. I do not believe this will improve schools - money will.
5. Disparity of dollars spent per student across the state is great. Results should not be used to compare school to school without considering factors of the population entering the schools, monetary composition of districts, etc.
6. Legislation needs to be changed to allow for a better card as it does not give the total picture.
7. The whole idea of a legislatively ordained report card is ludicrous, but politicians must play.
8. It makes sense, if there is a report card system for South Dakota legislators too.
9. Results by district on the front page of the newspapers are loved if a school does well, but some of Native American schools looked terrible.
10. When districts were mandated to use a statewide testing system we were told the test would NEVER be used to compare

schools.

11. Education is not an athletic event pitting one school against another. I have had chief administrators from South Dakota schools openly state their school will not only "teach to the test", but will, "teach the actual test items."

12. Schools cheat regularly by teaching to the test, allowing more than the prescribed time for answers, and not testing remedial students.

Conclusions

The comments authored by the responding superintendents lead us to conclude that the statewide report card system is an extremely emotional issue and that the superintendents were delighted for a forum in which to share their opinions. The vast majority of the superintendents shared procedural, philosophical and professional concerns through extremely negative responses and comments about the state wide report card system. Fifty eight percent of the superintendents felt South Dakota should NOT have a statewide report card system. An overwhelming seventy one percent reported that the statewide report card system information did NOT address the issues of school credibility and student

achievement. Additionally, sixty six percent of the superintendents stated opinions that this report card system would NOT have a positive educational effect over the next five years.

Many issues were iterated by the superintendents concerning the confict between the statewide report system versus outcomes based education, the statewide restructuring program, questions of local control, and parental or community misunderstandings when district scores are publicized. The superintendents felt this type of testing and the resulting comparisons were detrimental to South Dakota schools.

The alternatives to the statewide report card system that the superintendents frequently listed were Outcome Based Education and/or criterion referenced tests. Other factors listed were measurement by life skill competencies, high school graduation rates and college success.

Many questions remain unanswered. How can accountability be measured? By whom? For what purpose? These issues will be important far into the future.

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Table 1

Should South Dakota have a report card system?

| Category | SSD | MSD | LSD | TSD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 54% | 25% | 50% | 35% |
| No | 41% | 65% | 50% | 58% |
| No Response | 5% | 10% | 0% | 7% |

Table 2

Does the report card system address the pertinent issues of school accountability and student achievement?

| Category | SSD | MSD | LSD | TSD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 18% | 26% | 7% | 21% |
| No | 70% | 70% | 79% | 71% |
| No Response | 12% | 4% | 14% | 8% |

Table 3

Are categories as student-teacher ratio, SAT scores, etc., valid indicators of student achievement?

| Category | SSD | MSD | LSD | TSD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 30% | 30% | 14% | 28% |
| No | 61% | 60% | 72% | 61% |
| No Response | 9% | 10% | 14% | 11% |

Table 4

Will the report card system have a positive effect on student achievement over the next five years?

| Category | SSD | MSD | LSD | TSD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 28% | 22% | 29% | 25% |
| No | 64% | 68% | 64% | 66% |
| No Response | 8% | 10% | 7% | 9% |

Table 5

Will the report card system motivate parents to become more involved in the school?

| Category | SSD | MSD | LSD | TSD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 26% | 28% | 50% | 30% |
| No | 67% | 62% | 43% | 62% |
| No Response | 7% | 10% | 7% | 8% |